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ABSTRACT

Asserting that early education is the most cost-effective way to decrease the number of unskilled adults in the future, this report discusses the need to promote language and literacy learning in young children as a way to bolster the country's future workforce. Sections of the report discuss: (1) "Child Care: The Perfect Place to Develop Language Skills"; (2) "What the Research Says about Language Development"; (3) "What Early Childhood Teachers Can (and Should) Do"; (4) "Quality Child Care Makes a Difference"; (5) "The Building of a Successful Reader"; and (6) "What Can Employers Do?" Side notes provide several facts about child care in the United States and a timeline of young children's language development. (EV)

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PREPARING THE WORKERS OF TOMORROW: A REPORT ON EARLY LEARNING

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Early education is the most cost-effective way to decrease the number of unskilled adults in the future. If America could increase the number of traditional high school graduates with appropriate reading, writing, mathematics, reasoning and computer skills, it could go a long way toward filling available jobs and laying a suitable foundation on which workers could upgrade their skills once in the workforce.

– The Hudson Institute,
Workforce 2020: Work and Workers in the 21st Century

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"Business, more than any other occupation, is a continual dealing with the future; it is a continual calculation, an instinctive exercise in foresight."

~ Henry R. Luce, Co-Founder
Time Inc.

Preparing the Workers of Tomorrow Before They Enter Kindergarten

Great American business leaders understand both the need to plan ahead and the importance of education. And that understanding will be critical to resolve the growing business challenge they face today and well into the 21st century. It is one that will require exceptional foresight: an increasingly short supply of skilled workers, due to a population aging into retirement, slowed population growth, and the increasing level of skills demanded by most jobs in the nation's economy. This comes at a time when approximately 15% of American-born college graduates are functionally illiterate. Less than a third of America's fourth-graders are reading at grade level.

These future workers will be ill-prepared to meet the requirements of jobs which demand skill in reading, writing, math, reasoning and computing. This mismatch will continue to grow over the next 20 years as the most rapidly expanding job sectors require greater abilities than most American high school and college graduates now command.

Right now, nearly 50% of American businesses provide remedial education for their workers, teaching such basic skills as reading, writing, arithmetic and English. This is an astounding statistic, considering that 67% of the employees receiving remediation are high school graduates. Experts agree that early attention to language or literacy problems in young children would help alleviate this burden on business.

Employers are part of the solution. By focusing on children from birth to grade 12, business can help to improve education when it really matters: in their early years.

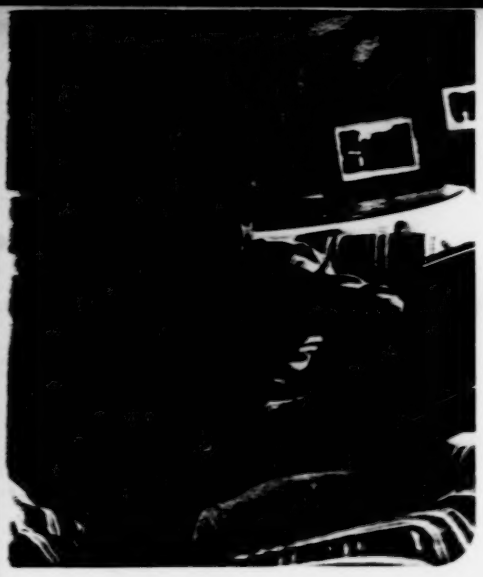
"We can't take a slipshod and easygoing attitude toward education in this country. And by "we" I don't mean "somebody else" but I mean me and I mean you. It is the future of our country – yours and mine – which is at stake."

~ Henry Ford II

Child Care: The Perfect Place to Develop Language Skills

Right now, 10.3 million preschoolers are in child care on a full day or part-time basis. Most are there because their parents or their only parent works. Much research, including some that has followed children into their adult years, demonstrates the benefits to children and to society of quality child care: better academic performance, better rates of graduation, better behavior, less engagement in risky behaviors and crime as juveniles.

Good quality child care is education for these millions of young children. It helps children develop and prepares them to enter school ready to learn and succeed. In quality child care, adults engage children, even very young children, in conversations that help them develop language skills, and read to the children frequently, in a way that leads to a discussion after the book has been read. Using books as a platform for conversation is key: it helps children develop vocabulary and comprehension skills, and builds a warm relationship between the child and the reader, motivating the child to want to hear, and read, more.



What the Research Says About Language Development

Research indicates that language skills are especially important because they are the cornerstone for other learning. Drawing on more than 20 years of research showing that children's grasp of language in the preschool and early elementary years is critical to their later success in school and in the workforce, the National Academy of Sciences is now supporting a renewed focus on language development in early childhood settings, including preschool and child care programs.

In a recent report, the Academy's National Research Council concludes that three- and four-year-olds who understand the meaning and structure of language have a much easier time learning to read and write later on.

Other experts agree that child care and early education provides a foundation that helps children acquire the skills they will need in a competitive global economy. According to the Hudson Institute in its *Workforce 2020* report, good early education is the most effective way to build the basic skills necessary for the 21st century and to increase national productivity and prosperity. "The crucial factor accounting for long-term success in the workforce is a basic education - encompassing the ability to read and write, do basic math, solve problems and behave dependably," the report says.

CHILD CARE FACTS

Parents of young children are in the workforce in record numbers:

- **65% of mothers with children under age 6**
- **78% of mothers with children 6-13**

What Early Childhood Teachers Can (and Should) Do

Teachers of preschool children represent an important – and largely underutilized – resource in promoting rich language skills and beginning literacy. They can promote language success through the selection of books, the arrangement of classroom space, and daily routines that include time for one-to-one and small group reading, story telling, and rhymes. Reading a story to one child at a time increases young children's conversations about books and their ability to focus on print. Listening to stories helps young children gain vocabulary even when teachers do not explain new words.

Much of the research on language development in child care and preschool settings focuses on dramatic or thematic play (i.e., playing in a "post office," "restaurant," or "veterinary hospital" setting), as well as on the role of the teacher. At Temple University, researchers found that a teacher's active engagement in a dramatic play setting significantly influenced Head Start preschoolers' ability to read environmental print and label items.

CHILD CARE FACTS

New research on brain development shows that children's mental and emotional capacities are built in the first three years of life. Quality child care is critical. The hallmarks of quality care are:

- **A safe, nurturing environment**
- **Trained, caring providers who are well compensated**
- **Activities that help children develop language skills as well as develop emotionally, socially and intellectually.**

These studies found that thematic play increases preschoolers' interaction with literacy materials, and fosters pretend reading and writing, and recognition of letters and words. But teacher guidance was key. The teacher's presence and interactions with the children, combined with the use of books, labels, paper, pencils, crayons, and typewriters, best promoted literacy-rich play.

Researchers have found that children's language skills can be improved through other practices commonly found in quality child care and preschool classrooms - where caregivers and teachers engage in intense, frequent, and lengthy interactions with children, use lots of eye contact, predictably respond to a child's verbal and non-verbal cues and bids for attention, carry on reciprocal "conversations" with infants and young children, talk with children about activities, and describe and label objects in the environment. Practices such as these help young children learn how to ask questions, request, get attention, describe, create extended narratives and explanations, and use conversation.

Quality Child Care Makes a Difference

The Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study released in June 1999 tracked the educational progress of young children for four years and confirmed what several other studies have documented: that children in higher-quality child care programs do better in language and math skills once they are in school than those who experienced lower-quality child care. The National Research Council (NRC) cites several other studies showing that quality child care and preschool programs help children get off to the right start, and develop language skills to their fullest potential.

Quality child care also helps alert parents, pediatricians, teachers and caregivers to special language or literacy needs children may have, and

CHILD CARE FACTS

Only 9% of child care homes and 14% of centers provide good quality care, according to the Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes study (1995). The majority of homes and centers provide mediocre care, where children are not stimulated to develop skills they need to succeed in school. Quality care costs more than most parents can afford. Parents pay, on average, $4,100 per year.

18 MONTHS:

At 18 months, babies are in the process of fast mapping words and their meanings - they can hear a word just once and internalize it forever. Babies are now able to use their knowledge about other people's intentions to figure out what words mean.

18-24 MONTHS:

This is when babies start to use two-word combinations, and to actually restructure language to suit their own purposes - for example, in order to get something. They now use different word orders to express different meanings. For example, "kiss teddy", does not mean the same thing as "teddy kiss".

24-36 MONTHS:

Between the ages of two and three years, young children use a distinctive "cookie monster" talk, in which children make up their own language and grammar, such as "Me eat more cookie".

36-48 MONTHS

Between the ages of three and four, children learn the general grammatical rules of their language, and by five years, children have these rules "down pat".

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Excerpted from "The Scientist in the Crib, Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn." Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl, William Morrow and Company, 1999

provides opportunity for early intervention. According to Dr. Reid Lyon at the National Institutes of Health, intervention that begins after the third grade is usually too late. Reading interventions are more effective the earlier they are implemented: a 12-year-old child will need between four and five times more "intervention time" than it would take to provide that same child with opportunities to acquire pre-literacy skills at an early age.

THE BUILDING OF A SUCCESSFUL READER

Three skills are crucial to learning to read:

1. **awareness and appreciation of sounds and words;**
2. **a knowledge of word meanings; and**
3. **an understanding that printed words have meaning.**

The more children know about reading when they enter kindergarten, the more teachers have to build on. Research shows that the children most likely to become successful readers begin school with more verbal skills, a broader vocabulary, greater letter knowledge, added appreciation for the sounds of words, and increased familiarity with the basic purposes of reading. That's why it's so important to talk with, sing with, rhyme with, and read with young children: these activities in the early years all lead to reading success in the school years.

Studies among children from low-income families show that programs that enhance language development are characterized by warm, stimulating relationships between them and responsive adults. They include specific, frequent, and rich language experiences over long periods from birth through the preschool years. Teachers and caregivers continually offer different opportunities to use language in meaningful, real-life situations: for example, by talking with the children as they prepare to go outside to the playground about what they will do and see outside, and encouraging the children's conversations and questions. Teachers also extend or build on children's skills with open-ended questions, asking "why?", "how?" and "what if?"

Many of the concepts and practices described in the NRC report are the hallmarks of all quality child care and early childhood education. The report makes three recommendations to promote language and literacy skills among preschoolers and help prevent reading problems when children enter school:

- All children should have access to early childhood environments that promote language and literacy growth and that address reading risk factors.
- Parents, pediatricians, preschool teachers and caregivers should identify preschool children with special language and literacy needs so they may receive early intervention.
- Programs that educate early childhood professionals should require mastery of information about how to promote the kinds of knowledge and skills that will prepare children for reading achievement in school.

CHILD CARE FACTS

Quality child care depends on the provider's motivation, training and experience. Child care teachers are grossly underpaid (averaging less than $8 per hour), causing high turnover and disrupting the continuity of care for young children.

What Can Employers Do?

Our nation cannot afford to overlook the crucial need to invest in quality child care and early childhood education, giving our children the tools they must have to succeed. Business can help build America's future workforce by using its resources wisely today, by recognizing that the foundation of children's learning is laid in the earliest years, and by shifting the community's focus toward providing appropriate, high quality educational experiences for children from birth to grade 12, not just Kindergarten to 12. Employers have the ability to make a real difference in the education of children from birth through high school. They can:

- Encourage employees who are parents and grandparents to read to and write with their children and grandchildren.
- Establish a lending library in the workplace so employees can take books and other reading materials home to their children.

CHILD CARE FACTS

Approximately 2,500 employers sponsor work-site child care centers, and about 6,000 employers nationwide offer work-family benefits to their employees.

- Set up high quality, educational preschools and child care centers at work sites or in the community, and educational after-school programs for employees' children. Include a well-stocked selection of books and language-rich materials.
- Allow employees to use paid time each month to volunteer as reading tutors at local schools or child care centers. In partnership with reading specialists at the local school or college, support tutor training. Consider tutoring in English and in other languages.
- Provide books, videos, consultants, and other resources to child care centers and preschools. Refurbish their libraries and reading centers. Help them modernize their teaching materials and equipment.
- Support after-school and summer school programs. Employers can play a key role in bringing together schools and other community and cultural resources to start or expand programs.[1]

Most of all, employers can give voice to the need for better early education and catalyze the actions of others in their communities to help more children become good readers.

[1] Excerpted from *Start Early, Finish Strong*, U.S. Department of Education.

The key is for families, teachers, and communities to work together and start reading to children early.

- US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement

CHILD CARE FACTS

The United States is the only western industrialized nation with no national policy or commitment, such as paid parental leave or universal government-supported preschool, to help young children and their families.

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